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UNCLAS SAN SALVADOR 003505

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: N/A

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SUBJECT: EL SALVADOR: THREE MONTHS FROM ELECTION, ARENA'S
LEAD STILL SOLID

REF: SAN SALVADOR 2507

1. (SBU) Leading daily La Prensa Grafica publicized a CID-Gallup poll taken November 30-December 5 that involved 1,212 interviews nationwide. President Saca's approval rating remained at 72 percent overall, tying his rating of August, and scarcely lower than the 74 percent approval recorded at the end of the first trimester of his administration. Respondents characterized the administration's three most significant achievements as its assistance to the poor/rural population, highway construction, and the formation of the FOSALUD program whereby public health clinics are funded via increased taxes on alcohol, tobacco, and firearms. The three areas identified for improvement included the failure of the "Firm Hand" policy to combat crime, unfulfilled campaign promises, and failure to end dollarization.

2. (SBU) Some 56 percent of those polled viewed President Saca as "rather" or "very" sincere and truthful; this rating has stayed consistent throughout the administration (considering the margin of error of 2.8 percent). Approximately 33 percent of respondents indicated an intention to vote for the Nationalist Republican Alliance (ARENA), with the Farabundo Marti National Liberation Front (FMLN) mustering only 17 percent in intention to vote; some 40 percent responded that they either did not intend to vote, or had not yet decided which party they favored. Some 55 percent of respondents stated they intended to vote in March.

3. (SBU) FMLN hardliner leader and failed presidential candidate Schafik Handal continued to be one of the most divisive figures in the poll, with 50 percent of the population disproving of his performance, while 16 percent approve.

4. (SBU) COMMENT: Saca's personal charisma and media savvy are responsible for his party's high approval ratings, and the President's "coattails" may offer ARENA candidates a ride to victory in March. San Salvador city hall (which ARENA lost to the FMLN in 1997) is an election of great interest, and there is widespread speculation that ARENA may increase its Legislative Assembly delegation from its present 29 seats. Saca's popularity is largely based on his optimistic rhetoric about the future; if ARENA takes back San Salvador city hall and gains greater power in the Assembly, it will need to deliver results soon on reducing crime and improving the economy, lest its own success at the polls backfire as citizens become increasingly disillusioned in the face of the nation's pressing problems. END COMMENT.
Barclay